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## The Xenophanean Religious Thought

A Field of Various Interpretations

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## **THE XENOPHANEAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT : A FIELD OF VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS**

The dawn of the Greek philosophy has always been considered as a misty period of time, which cannot be easily penetrated by the historian's scientific research.

Little information has been found about the exact events that have woven the life of the first philosophers, and the only fragments that have been saved can be regarded as the poor ruins of a grand temple. Thus, there have always been discussions among the studious investigators of the antiquity about new interpretations of the texts and re-arrangements of our concept of the presocratic thought.

One of the thinkers the most difficult to be defined, Xenophanes, can provide us with a vivid example of those doubts and disagreements. The limits of his long life could be placed approximately between 570 and 470 B.C.<sup>1</sup>; the geographical amplex of his voyages is but partly spotted between the East and West frontiers of the Hellenic world.

The historians of philosophy have accorded a moderated interest to this lonely figure of the presocratic pantheon; it was enough, though, to create some problems of vital importance, as far as it concerns the comprehension of the particularities of his thought: there is agreement on one point, but disagreement on another (which is more often the case). As a selection was, therefore, absolutely necessary for a more close examination of the ample variety of opinions on the questions thus presented, we have chosen to treat some of the aspects defended by certain well known scholars of the 20th century.

The first and fundamental question is, of course, how should Xenophanes be characterised. W. Jaeger considers that «the first Greek thinker whom we know as a personality»<sup>2</sup>, «only as a theologian, indeed, can (he) really be understood»<sup>3</sup>. He takes Xenophanes for a man of irrational, but immediate

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<sup>1</sup> See W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, I, Cambridge, 1967, p. 363; S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge, 1983<sup>2</sup>, rev. by M. Schofield (first ed. 1957), p. 164; J. BARNES, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> W. JAEGER, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, Oxford, 1947, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

access to the divinity<sup>4</sup>, who had to put his thoughts in verse, according to the tradition of the Greek «paideia»<sup>5</sup> (a key-word for W. Jaeger).

This opinion was quite opposed to that of J. Burnet, who had already placed Xenophanes between poetry and philosophy<sup>6</sup>, accentuating the satirical aspect of his poems concerning the theological problems<sup>7</sup>.

S. Kirk and J.E. Raven also accord to the Colophonean thinker a place among the poets : «He was a poet with thoughtful interests, especially about religion and the gods...»<sup>8</sup>, but they think also that it is not « safe to exaggerate his non-scientific character on the grounds of his theological interest»<sup>9</sup>.

The conception of Xenophanes as a poet is shared by W.K.C. Guthrie, too, and as «poetic form is no bar to philosophy»<sup>10</sup>, he is granted with the statement of being «the only one whose genuine writings find a place both among the Presocratic philosophers of Diels and the lyric anthology of Diehl»<sup>11</sup>. So, we have here the attribution, with every possible reluctance, of the title of «philosopher» to Xenophanes<sup>12</sup>, although Guthrie admits that philosophy was of a secondary importance to him, as he was rather interested in the didactic role of poetry<sup>13</sup>. The distinguished scholar recognises «the zeal for theological and moral reform» as «the strongest motive behind the poems»<sup>14</sup>, a fact which doesn't prohibit the systematic use of logical argument<sup>15</sup>.

As far as it concerns the detailed study of J. Barnes, we can find there a multi-dimensional image of Xenophanes : «a poet and a satirist of note, a versatile polymath, and a considerable philosopher»<sup>16</sup>. Being mainly interested in theology doesn't make Xenophanes « the progenitor of that pestilential tribe of theological irrationalists»<sup>17</sup>, as in his poems « there is no

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> J. BURNET, *L'aurore de la philosophie grecque*, tr. de l'anglais (de la 2e éd.) par A. Reymond, Paris, 1919 (engl. ed. 1892, 1908<sup>2</sup>), p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361, 383.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>16</sup> J. BARNES, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

appeal to sublime intuition, no descent to mere enthusiasm»<sup>18</sup>; quite the contrary, Barnes undertakes a careful analysis of the theological fragments, which finally proves that «Xenophanes' theology is a rational construction, relying on logic and not on mystical intuition», that is why «he has earned the title of natural theologian»<sup>19</sup>.

The fact that there is, as seen above, a general tendency to accept the presence of rational thought in Xenophanes' doctrine, guides us directly to the problem of the possible existence of a well-organised philosophical system, which could perhaps be expressed in a complete work bearing the title «Concerning Nature» (*Περὶ Φύσεως*)<sup>20</sup>.

J. Burnet thinks that there is no sure evidence of Xenophanes writing a philosophical poem<sup>21</sup> and that a title *Περὶ Φύσεως* must have been arbitrarily given to one of his poems by the librarians of Pergamos<sup>22</sup>. In consequence, a series of his theological and philosophical ideas was expressed only in various satirical poems<sup>23</sup>.

W. Jaeger, too, takes haste to renounce the possibility of Xenophanes' writing a complete philosophical (natural mainly) theory, according to the Milesian tradition : «a philosopher Xenophanes with a system of his own never really existed»<sup>24</sup>, «Neither could such a didactic poem really exist, as, moreover, his works are quite unphilosophical»<sup>25</sup>.

S. Kirk and J.E. Raven affront the possibility of the Xenophanean expression through satires, but they find highly improbable<sup>26</sup> the existence of a formal poem concerning physical matters.

While W.K.C. Guthrie just mentions his agreement with Deichgräber's point of view about the existence of a poem *Περὶ Φύσεως* in the Hellenistic age, without going any further, J. Barnes thinks that «there is evidence enough for a detailed Xenophanean cosmology, on the Milesian model»<sup>27</sup>, which makes the Colophonean emigrant «a well-rounded thinker»<sup>28</sup>. In consequence,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> See STOBÆUS (DK 21 A 36), Geneva Scholiast on the *Iliad* (DK 21 B 30), POLLUX (DK 21 B 39).

<sup>21</sup> J. BURNET, *op. cit.*, p. 130, 131.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130, n.3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> W. JAEGER, *op. cit.*, p.40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>27</sup> J. BARNES, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Barnes declares himself quite opposed to the most popular opinion, which rejects the possibility of a systematic philosophy of Xenophanes, because «the majority view has no intrinsic merits and is supported by no ancient testimony», while the doxography supports quite the contrary<sup>29</sup>. So, «it remains to be shown that a simple systematic pattern can be discovered in, or imposed upon, his thoughts»<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, Barnes, for whom the fragment B 34 «implies the existence, if not of a poem «Concerning Nature», at least of a fairly systematic and comprehensive parcel of scientific and philosophical verses»<sup>31</sup>, proceeds quite carefully, step by step, to his examination of the Xenophanean thought, analysing the points of his theology<sup>32</sup>.

On the whole, the question of a systematic Xenophanean philosophy is not completely cut off from his obscure relation with the Eleatic School : Plato and Aristotle, taken by the usual tendency of the Greek philosophers to classify their ancestors on a line where the teacher precedes the pupil, were the first ones to disorient the scholars by treating Xenophanes as one of the first figures of the «Eleatic tribe»<sup>33</sup> (a fact which has been led even further by the pseudo-aristotelian treatise *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia* written rather by someone dedicated to the study of the Eleatics<sup>34</sup>).

The vague information of a poem composed by Xenophanes on the foundation of Elea resulted in the impression of his taking part in the colonisation himself, which is not at all sure. Although we cannot exclude the wandering rhapsode's passage by the city, most of the scholars don't admit that he really took part in the foundation, as there is not enough evidence<sup>35</sup> (except Guthrie, who faces that possibility also<sup>36</sup>).

The modern scholars don't accept Reinhardt's idea that Xenophanes was simply a follower of the Eleatic School<sup>37</sup>, someone who just presented the "Ov of Parmenides «in a theological mask»<sup>38</sup>; on the contrary, they place him in an interchange of ideas with the Eleatics (as he shares with them the same

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> PLATO, *Sophist*, 242d 5 (DK 11 A 29); ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, A 5, 986b 21 (DK 11 A 30).

<sup>34</sup> See J. BURNET, *op. cit.*, p. 140; W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

<sup>35</sup> Between others, S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 166; J. BURNET, *op. cit.*, p. 129-130.

<sup>36</sup> W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>37</sup> See W. JAEGER, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Th. VEIKOS, *Οι Προσωκρατικοί*, Athens, εκδ. Ζαχαρόπουλος, 1988, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup> W. JAEGER, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

temporal and spacial environment), without attributing to him a decisive role in the formation of the School. It is also considered improbable that he just borrowed the context of Parmenides' doctrine, as the organisation of their thought is quite different. In no way can the God of Xenophanes be interpreted as a prevail of the Parmenidean «Being»<sup>39</sup>.

As far as it concerns the influences that have certainly marked the Xenophanean doctrine, the Ionian thinkers have been taken under consideration (e.g. about the idea of a unique essence of the world)<sup>40</sup>. W. Jaeger had even reached the point to say that Xenophanes on a certain subject «merely works out some of the consequences» of Anaximander's characterisation of the divinity as «infinite» (ἄπειρον)<sup>41</sup>.

On the other hand, he certainly doesn't take after the Milesian dogmatism. His critical spirit is well expressed by a caustic satire, in his *Silloi*, where he does not hesitate to attack other philosophers, and even the «teachers of the whole Greece»<sup>42</sup>, Homer and Hesiod, an act which demands even greater courage<sup>43</sup>. As Barnes has it, «he was familiar with and often highly critical of the thoughts of his predecessors and contemporaries, and it can be hardly doubted that his opinions influenced and were influenced by those of his peers»<sup>44</sup>.

Of course, his primary interest was not a study of the begining of the natural world, but of the concept of God<sup>45</sup>. «While his cosmology is very well explained as a further development of the milesian cosmology, his theology is distracted from the main course of the presocratic thought...»; however, the Xenophanean God is «a historical bridge, taking us to Heraclitus»<sup>46</sup>. The main lines of his at first «destructive» and then «constructive» theology (the terms are used by W.K.C. Guthrie and by K. Boudouris)<sup>47</sup> have been thoroughly discussed, but, due to the minitious details of such an examination, we shall turn our attention to the more general question about the exact number of gods that Xenophanes implied through his verses.

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<sup>39</sup> Th. VEIKOS, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> The earth for Xenophanes : DK 12 B 27.

<sup>41</sup> W. JAEGER, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> DK 21 B 10.

<sup>43</sup> DK 21 A 1.

<sup>44</sup> J. BARNES, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>45</sup> S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>46</sup> Th. VEIKOS, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

<sup>47</sup> W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 370, 373; K. BOUDOURIS, *Προσωκρατική Φιλοσοφία*, Athens, 1982, p. 51.

It is true that the terms «monotheism», «polytheism», «pantheism» are charged with a context which seems quite stranger to the ancient Greek thought. W.K.C. Guthrie is trying to clarify the situation in order to avoid any misunderstandings : «It must be understood that the question of monotheism or polytheism, which is of vital religious importance to the Christian, Jew or Moslem, never had the same prominence in the Greek mind»<sup>48</sup>. Taking this fact under consideration, we should be very careful in our characterisation of Xenophanes' beliefs.

J. Burnet supports that if the attribute «One» that Xenophanes accords to God is monotheism, then he was a monotheist, but «it is probable that Xenophanes' contemporaries would have called him an atheist rather than anything else»<sup>49</sup>. Finally, Burnet takes a rather strict position about the mentioning of the «gods» in the works of the rhapsode; he considers it as only related to his attacks against traditional anthropomorphism : «we cannot admit that Xenophanes conceded to the existence of subordinate or special gods; because it is exactly the existence of these gods that he had particularly in mind to deny»<sup>50</sup>.

W. Jaeger takes the other end; he rejects the idea of Xenophanes as a pantheist («he is not to be dismissed with that word»<sup>51</sup>), as «he does not say that the world is God, (...) he merely makes way for a philosophic conception by denying that God's form is human»<sup>52</sup>. So, in parallel with the main figure of the «great» god, the traditional pluralism is still respected, although «for understandable reasons Christian writers have always tended to read their own monotheism into Xenophanes' proclamation of the One God»<sup>53</sup>.

S. Kirk and J.E. Raven defend a more «traditional» interpretation of the Xenophanean theology : they consider the use of the plural of «gods» as «a concession, perhaps not a fully conscious one, to the popular religious terminology» but to them «it seems very doubtful whether Xenophanes would have recognized other minor deities as being in any way related to the «One God», except as dim human projections of it»<sup>54</sup>. This concept of the one god is said to be due to a «reaction from Homeric anthropomorphic polytheism»<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

<sup>49</sup> J. BURNET, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>51</sup> W. JAEGER, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>54</sup> S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

That one god was «not precisely located», although he necessarily had a body, therefore we cannot identify him with the world<sup>56</sup>.

W.K.C. Guthrie disagrees on that final point and declares that Xenophanes, while consenting to a worship of gods «purified from anthropomorphism and immorality», «is emphatic that god is essentially one, but this one god was (...) the living and divine cosmos», so «he probably thought that the spirit of this universal being manifested itself to the imperfect perceptions of man in many forms»<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, according to Guthrie, «the god of Xenophanes was spherical»<sup>58</sup>.

As far as it concerns J. Barnes, he considers himself obliged by logical deduction to return to more conventional interpretations : «Xenophanes, I conclude, was a monotheist, as the long tradition has it; and he was an a priori monotheist : like later Christian theologians, he argued on purely logical grounds that there could not be a plurality of gods»<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, Barnes is bound to consider the question of Xenophanes' pantheism, which he dismisses with the characterisation of a failure (as an effort of combining the Ionian theology with the new scientific thought) «hardly intelligible or consistent»<sup>60</sup>.

Th. Veikos, facing the apparent contradiction in the simultaneous admission of the concept of the One God, on one hand, and the «gods» on the other, tries to give a satisfactory explanation by making a distinction between the philosophical essence of God, as conceived by Xenophanes, which was not destined to be a subject of worship and faith, and the gods of the already existing religion, that would serve as a medium for the initiation of the people to the purified idea of the divinity. «We could very well imagine Xenophanes as a conventional worshipper of the polytheistic religion, considering that he would feel exceptional among the others, because he understood that common gods are human constructions, and being so, he had a clearer idea of them without prejudice and self-illusions»<sup>61</sup>.

After the brief inspection of only a limited selection of opinions on various problems raised by the Xenophanean fragments, it is evident that the study of this certain thinker has known aspects continuously changing throughout the century. Even some of the most important historians of philosophy (influenced by and influencing the way of thinking of their

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>57</sup> W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>59</sup> J. BARNES, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>61</sup> Th. VEIKOS, *op. cit.*, p. 87-88.



times) have tried to give each his own answers, just to arrive at leaving us with more questions.

The subject that mostly carries the weight of dubious interpretation remains the doctrine about God, where the epigrammatic language of the poet reveals almost as much as it hides his exact concept. Therefore, the portrait of Xenophanes is traced in many – often contradictory – ways, a fact that permits us an access to only a rather confusing idea of his personality. Who was he, finally ? «An intellectual revolutionary»<sup>62</sup>, a sower of «new philosophical seed, from which fruitful crop of ideas was soon to be reaped»<sup>63</sup>, «not a specialist, but a true σοφιστής or sage, prepared to turn his intelligence upon almost any problem»<sup>64</sup>, someone who «remained a theist while rejecting the traditional forms of theism»<sup>65</sup> ? We cannot be sure that he would «smile if he knew that one day he would be looked upon as a theologian»<sup>66</sup>, but perhaps he would be amazed by the extent of difficulties the posteriors have in clarifying his thought.

In the present article a limited effort has been made, in order to demonstrate the main-perplexed-lines of the problematic on the Xenophanean thought, as fundamentally traced in certain well-known studies on the Presocratics. Undoubtedly, this could only be considered as the first step of a long process, indispensable for a possible complete presentation of the subject, as there are, of course, many contemporary scholars who have undertaken the task to explore the dark points of the Xenophanean doctrine, putting the cited problems under a new light, and forming a bibliographical corpus of considerable measure.

However, a closer study of the present estimation of the Colophonian rhapsode wouldn't be deprived of interest, as it seems that his verses have kept their force to trouble the listener's thoughts, all through the ages.

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<sup>62</sup> W. JAEGER, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

<sup>64</sup> S. KIRK and J.E. RAVEN, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>65</sup> J. BARNES, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>66</sup> J. BURNET, *op. cit.*, p. 144.